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RESEARCH ARTICLE

DEATH, THE LEVELLER, A STUDY OF SIMONE DE BEAUVOIR'S *'ALL MEN ARE MORTAL'* THROUGH AN EXISTENTIAL LENS

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study is to prove firstly, existentialism above all that of Simone de Beauvoir, is an optimistic doctrine because if we are truly free, the Other cannot be our hell, secondly, the novel *All Men are Mortal* presents a best example of existentialism because it offers not only examples of how to treat the Other with bad faith, but also with authenticity. The paper starts off with an examination of the main principles of existentialism as they are defined by the philosophical works of Simone de Beauvoir and her partner Jean- Paul Sartre. Beauvoir's *All Men are Mortal* represents humanity entirely, the inevitable circle of life and the contingence that time and death bring. The novel highlights the fundamental human condition, highlighting the significance of individual choice and the meaninglessness of existence in the face of death. The particularly focuses on the concept of "existence precedes essence" and the burden of freedom. Beauvoir explores this concept through the immortal protagonist, Fosca, who despite his long life and numerous experiences, struggles to find meaning and purpose in a world where everything is ultimately meaningless. The protagonist's experiences, particularly his attempts to shape the lives of others and the consequences of his actions, illustrate this theme.

Keywords: *Existentialism, Meaninglessness, Burden of Freedom, Death.*

Existentialism is a philosophical movement that focuses on individual existence, rejecting absolute reason. At its core, Existentialism focuses on man rather than nature. It believes that life lacks inherent meaning or purpose, and it is up to each individual to create meaning through choices and actions. Existentialism gained momentum post-World War II and strongly influenced various disciplines, including theology, drama, art, literature, and psychology. The essential cause for the emergence of Existentialism was that people had lost their belief in the existence of divine beings and God, owing to the wars and losses suffered.

Existentialists' views of "existence" and "essence" contrast with the theological view. The term existentialism is primarily associated with a cultural movement that grew out of the wartime intellectual atmosphere left in Paris and spread through art as much as philosophy. Therefore, Existentialism is frequently viewed as an aesthetic movement rooted in certain philosophical thoughts and supplanting surrealism at the centre of European artistic fashion.

Sartre's frequently repeated statement, "Existence precedes essence," constitutes the basic understanding of existentialist thought. The claim, "Man is nothing else but what he makes of himself," is built upon this understanding. Sartre elaborates on this first principle of Existentialism by stating, "What do we mean by saying the existence precedes essence? We mean that man first of all exists, encounters himself, surges up in the world – and defines himself afterward." He further emphasizes that "He will not be anything until later, and then he will be what he makes of himself" (Sartre, 1948:28). Speaking of this freedom of choice, Flynn speaks about authenticity and Koestenban about responsibility. Further, Flynn (2009:18) believes that Existentialism has developed a social conscience and with the convention that the fine arts and literature at least should be socially and politically committed.

In a similar vein, Bohlmann points out, for existentialists, "the world is utterly without absolute meaning, and man is left to invest his own meaning for his existence" (14), while Kierkegaard asserts that Existentialism is related much to human freedom. Existentialists believe that man has no fixed nature or essence like animals and plants do. Each human being makes choices that define him. Choice is, therefore, central to human existence, and consciousness is open to infinite possibilities and inescapable (Panjaitan 1996:27).

Existentialist ideologies challenge traditional views that posit a fixed human nature or universal moral order, emphasizing individuals to navigate existence through their own choices, free will, and personal responsibility. In the view of most existentialists, a man's primary distinction is the freedom to choose, which is an absolute freedom. Since man has absolute freedom, it is impossible to justify his actions by referring to anything outside himself, and he has no excuses for anything he does. He is thrown into the world as a free being. This philosophy grapples with the human condition in a modern, often chaotic world, where notions of freedom, authenticity, and self-definition take precedence. Consolidated based on various observations by Existential Philosophers, the following themes highlight Existentialism and its view of human existence.

- **EXISTENCE PRECEDES ESSENCE,** asserts that individuals do not have inherent qualities that determine their way of life actions. Instead, they define themselves through the choices that self-project, and their essence is not pre-determined but created through their lived experiences.
- **TIME IS ESSENTIAL** in an existentialist's view. Humans are fundamentally bound by time, with different temporal states such as the 'not yet,' the 'already,' and the 'present' that carry distinct meanings and values.
- **THE HUMANIST** approach is person-centred and focuses on the individual's quest for identity and meaning amidst societal and economic pressures, using the person-centred approach.
- **FREEDOM AND RESPONSIBILITY** in Existentialism highlights the paradox of this notion, as individuals become responsible for their actions and the person they become despite their freedom to act.
- **ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS,** though they vary among existentialists, there is a shared emphasis on examining the authenticity of one's personal life and societal role.

Along with the aforementioned, Existentialism also encompasses the concepts of anxiety, dread, and despair. Existentialists also consider nothingness as a central thought of being, representing an absence from which humans generate the essence of their existence. The above-mentioned themes of Existentialist Philosophy can be seen well exemplified in the works of French writer, feminist, and member of the intellectual fellowship of philosopher writers - Simone De Beauvoir. Though she is best known for her trailblazing work in feminist philosophy, *The Second Sex* (1949), her original contributions to Existentialism and phenomenology can be found across her works. From her first philosophical novel, *She Came to Stay* (1943), to her politicization of old age in *The Coming of Age* (1970), she writes with phenomenological undertones.

She is often regarded as the midlife of Jean-Paul Sartre's existential ethics. Irrespective of that, she had been active in the French intellectual scene all through her life and played a pivotal role in the philosophical debates of the times, both as an author and as an editor of the leftist journal *Les Temps Moderness.* She has left a lasting impact as an activist and public intellectual through her enduring contributions in the fields of ethics, social and political philosophy, Existentialism, phenomenology, and feminist philosophy.

Of her other works of fiction, perhaps the best known is *The Mandarins* (1954), for which she won the "Prix Goncourt." It is a chronicle of the attempts of post-World War II intellectuals. She also wrote four books on philosophy, including *The Ethics of Ambiguity* (1947); a travel book on China, *the Long March* (1957) and the United States *America Day by Day* (1948); and a number of essays, the best known of which *The Second Sex* is. In 2009, a new English–language translation of *The Second Sex* was published. Several volumes of Beauvoir's work are devoted to autobiography. These include *Memoirs of a Dutiful Daughter* (1958), *The Prime of Life* (1960), *Force of Circumstance* (1963), and *All Said and Done*

(1972). In addition to treating feminist issues, Beauvoir was concerned with the issue of aging, which she addressed in *A Very Easy Death* (1964), on her mother's death in a hospital and *Old Age* (1970), a bitter reflection of society's indifference to the elderly. In 1981, she wrote *Adieux: A Farewell to Sartre*, a painful account of Sartre's last years.

Beauvoir's *'All Men Are Mortal',* published in 1946, explores the ideas of mortality and immortality through the notion of finitude and death as they pertain to man's relationship to time. Published shortly after World War II, it passionately deals with human desires for control, vanity, and the pursuit of dictatorial power. The novel reflects de Beauvoir's existentialist perspective through the characters Fosca and Regina, highlighting the complexities of human existence and the search for purpose. The novel begins with an upper-middle-class artist, Regina. She is tormented by the knowledge that her beauty, joy, and experiences are not unique to her. Even romantic love, described as the "great human drama," fails to satisfy her because it is not an individual experience. Regina's greatest fear is the passage of time and the inevitability of growing old and dying.

Through her insatiable desire to be unique, Regina's vile thoughts make her character almost impossible to empathize with. Florence is having an affair with two men without either knowing of the other. In an effort to end Florence's happiness, Regina tells Sanier that Florence is having an affair with Mauscot. Causing a disturbance in the happiness of others only gave her a short period of satisfaction before returning to her usual bitterness.

Her dissatisfaction reaches a peak when she encounters a mysterious man, Raymond Fosca, who appears indifferent to the basic needs of life, such as eating or sleeping, and seems immune to boredom. His self-assurance deeply unsettles Regina, as though his presence diminishes her own existence. Drawn to him by her insecurities, she learns that he has recently been released from an asylum and claims to be immortal. Regina becomes enamoured with Fosca, believing that by being close to him, she too might transcend time.

As Regina's obsession with Fosca deepens, she becomes isolated from her friends, who see her relationship with him as a descent into madness. However, Regina believes that her involvement with Fosca brings her closer to a state of timeless immortality, or at least enlightenment. Regina is filled with ideas of what they could accomplish together, while this statement makes Fosca nostalgic for the many times he has heard this before. Rather than feeling fear, Regina's reaction was of pleasure at the thought that she is the only woman alive who is loved by an immortal. She is content with being the only woman he saw amidst millions of others and welcomes the belief that even after her death, she will remain in the world through Fosca's eternal memory of her. She urges Fosca to channel his talents into becoming a playwright and writing roles for her, but he remains uninspired. Being filled with ideas of what they could accomplish together, she makes Fosca nostalgic for the many times he has heard this before. Upon realizing that his presence is bringing her more harm than good, and Fosca decides to leave Paris and Regina behind.

Nevertheless, he decides make her understand futility of immortality through his centuries-long life.

Fosca recounts his birth and his rise to power. His project begins in the city where he was born and now rules Carmona. He leads his men to victory against neighbouring cities, he establishes commerce, and when the city is in danger of falling, he picks her back up and helps rebuild. He feels that he needs more time to fulfill his humanist project of saving the world. He sets forth a project tasked with finding a "cure." This cure would allow him to live long enough to save his city from demise. At this moment, his soldiers find Bartolomeo, an old beggar who claims he has the cure Fosca is searching for. Bartolomeo brings Fosca a liquid-filled bottle and claims it is the "elixir of immortality" (107). While immortality was not the initial objective, Fosca believes it is the best thing he could have found to ensure the success of his project.

However, after ruling Carmona for two centuries, Fosca decides that he can no longer save the paradise in the city. Now feeling that Carmona and Italy are too small, Fosca decides to begin an even larger project that will save humanity. He has accepted that the only way to save mankind is to unite it under one empire, under one man. In his efforts to secure an heir to the crown who will listen to his advice, Fosca spends nearly two decades in the city of Malines watching over Maximilian's son Charles, who would eventually rule the empire. It is with Charles that Fosca believes he can create a paradise on Earth, but he is soon proven wrong as the empire begins to face challenges within Germany and Spain, as well as in the Americas. Charles is tormented by the reports of the treatment of the Indians overseas and states that he would like to rule "without causing anyone an injustice" (108).

The empire begins to have a battle of control with the papacy, while at the same time, Fosca and Charles are dealing with new Christian sects in Germany. The emperor agreed to hear Luther's claims, and Fosca winces at the sight of a man capable of maintaining that "his conscience was more important that the interests of the Empire, indeed, than the interests of the world" (110). The pair is convinced of the danger that sects pose to the survival of the empire, but Fosca is also interested in understanding these men. Fosca comes to realize that men like Luther were capable of convincing the populace that each man was in control of his relations with God and of his actions. Men like Luther were incredibly dangerous to his humanist project, and the only way to succeed was to convince these men to surrender their impulses and follies. After hearing Luther speak, Fosca learns that the people defended him because each man wanted to decide his fate for himself. Fosca advises Charles to exile Luther and decides that he will fight for humanity against itself. After ten years of having banished Luther, the sects continued to flourish, and Fosca decided that the only way to squash their influence would be to understand them. After attending a sermon, he questions an Anabaptist prophet and learns that he preaches destruction because there would be nothing for man to do on earth if all men were happy. In other words, in an effort to live, nothing else is left to man but destruction. Eventually, Fosca meets the two imprisoned monks and pleads with them to realize that mankind must be united to overcome poverty, injustice, and war,

holding to the idea that "there is only one good-to act according to the dictates of one's conscience" (111). The monks also chose to die the same way Antonio and Beatrice had chosen to die instead of living according to the dictates of another.

In Cuba, Chile, Mexico, and many other cities, Fosca learns that the only thing they have accomplished is the decimation of natives and incredible poverty for the locals. It is with this news that Fosca returns to Charles. Both men learn that to reign was to be responsible for the destruction of man. Fosca reluctantly resigns to the idea that while Carmona and the earth seemed too small for him, the universe he wished to rule did not exist and that men were forever divided. He tells Charles of his son's decision to die and attempts to teach him that men do not want happiness or salvation but to live for the moments "when a fire burns in their hearts." It is here that Fosca finally accepts the truth he refused to acknowledge; it is not what humanity receives "that has value in their eyes; it's what they do" (113). Ultimately, Fosca understands that the paradise he wants to create for man and woman is his and her worst possible fate. He realizes that time will also be his downfall because he recognizes that he does not need time as much as he needs the commitment of others for his plan to be successful. Upon this realization, Fosca takes leave of Charles and begins a new journey without a destination or plan. This is a perfect rendition of Beauvoir's idea in the ethics of ambiguity that one needs the other to adopt his project for it to have any form of success.

He continues to tell Regina his story, and while many centuries pass and he meets new people, each relationship ends with a man or woman feeling envy, pity, or hate for him. He never feels like he is a part of the species, though he continues to help humanity. He continues to love and feel anguish, but every chapter of his life ends the same way. Fosca becomes "neither good nor bad, neither miserly nor generous." He helps fund a university, he finds another love, has children, and watches it all crumble in the face of his immortality. Fosca becomes involved in France's revolution against Lafayette's troops; he organizes meetings with Armand and eventually helps his comrades escape imprisonment while remaining behind while they carry out their project.

Through Fosca's account, it becomes clear that what Regina initially desires—eternal youth, immortality, and ultimate power—leads only to despair. His condition reveals that mortality and the constraints of a normal lifespan are the things that give life meaning. Fosca's immortality has stripped him of his humanity, leaving him "a ghost, a witness, forever apart from the rest of humankind" (62). His endless existence has led only to a torturous cycle of emptiness and a yearning for death.

Raimondo Fosca's character embodies deeper existential themes through his immortality. It exposes the futility of striving for power or control, as all human endeavors will eventually fade into insignificance. Regina is left devastated by this revelation. After Fosca leaves her, she lets out a scream—a cry of existential horror as she realizes the futility of both life and death. This moment of terror mirrors the existential dread felt by many intellectuals during the World War II Era. Beauvoir uses Regina's scream to reflect the horror and

revulsion provoked by the destructive ambitions of dictators like Hitler.

Simone de Beauvoir skilfully designed Fosca to challenge whether each seemingly futile action scars individuals psychologically or liberates them in the end. His journey, divided into three phases, mirrors the core aspects of Existentialism: the search for life's meaning, the notion of freedom, and the experience of nothingness. In the novel's first phase, Fosca struggles with mortality, fearing he'll die before achieving something meaningful. As Sartre states, "Man is nothing else but what he makes himself," (1957: 15) Fosca embodies this struggle for purpose. However, his fear of death drives him to seek immortality, believing only eternal life can grant him freedom. On the contrary, when he became immortal, he realised, "To live without an end is to live without freedom, bound by time instead of liberated by it" (p. 137).

According to Existentialism, individuals are responsible for creating their essence rather than receiving it from a divine power before birth. Throughout his seven-century-long life, Fosca persistently craves this essence. His quest began when he was born in 1279 in Carmona, Italy. As he grows, he fights in wars, protects his city, and yearns to do more for his people. However, the looming threat of death haunts him as he worries, "What if I die before accomplishing something remarkable?" (109) when the Genovese forces once again attack. While he has found purpose in life, the fear of mortality grips him. He realizes that even significant accomplishments lose their meaning when confronted with death, symbolizing the absurdity of life and its inherent nothingness. Fosca's concern about death distracts him from his quest for meaning, and he begins to believe that only immortality can bring him true freedom. However, even after gaining immortality, he faces emptiness, losing loved ones, wars, and his ability to feel, questioning the value of his long life. After spending two decades fulfilling his desires, he feels exhausted and empty and reflects, "I have ruled this country for two decades, and I am tired" (109). Fosca eventually realizes that prolonged existence only leads to greater futility, with true significance found in authentic actions done in the moment. As Camus suggests, "The literal meaning of life is whatever you're doing that prevents you from killing yourself."

Beauvoir herself believed that existence is inseparable from responsibility. Regine takes full responsibility for her actions and behavior throughout her relationship with Fosca, while Fosca, in contrast, drifts through life without purpose. He becomes detached, no longer pushing for meaning in his life. As Heidegger notes, "Existence is a way of understanding what constitutes his own existence" (182). Fosca's immortality strips him of one of the three fundamental elements of existence—birth, life, and death—and his existence loses its meaning without death.

Ultimately, the philosophical question continually circles back to non-existence. Regina longs for immortality, but this longing only has meaning because of her mortality. After recounting his story to Regine, Fosca laments, "I cannot risk my life for anything, I cannot laugh like anyone, I cannot cry, my heart cannot hurt deeply. I belong to nowhere; I have no past, present, or future. I do not want anything, I

am no one… I have nothing to hope…" (Beauvoir, Simone de,115).

In the tragic conclusion of *All Men Are Mortal*, Fosca confronts the haunting consequences of his quest for immortality, acknowledging the sorrowful fate he imposed on an innocent mouse who is also condemned to an endless, hollow existence because of his experiments. Beavour underscores the philosophical weight of finitude and the cruelty of eternal life through his acknowledgment of guilt. He is determined to leave Regina to her mortal destiny and withdraw from Armand's ambitious project. In a moment of poignant irony, when Fosca leaves, Regina feels her essence being pulled away, leaving her not as a unique individual but as something transient and insubstantial—merely a "gnat, foam, [and an] ant, until death." (115) At the same time, the mournful jingle of the clock tower echoes through the air, heightening her despair and driving her to a scream of lament.

In examining Simone de Beauvoir's *All Men Are Mortal* through an existential lens, this study highlights the inextricable link between mortality, meaning, and the human pursuit of significance. Beauvoir's narrative reveals mortality as the ultimate equalizer, stripping away the illusions of permanence and exposing the human condition's vulnerability. While living across centuries of European political history, he lives through major historical events—the rise of the Hapsburg Empire, the colonization of the New World, the English Reformation, and the French Revolution—he experiences deep but ultimately empty relationships. His immortality renders all personal connections meaningless, as he outlives his lovers, friends, and even his own son. While others envy his condition, Fosca realizes that a life without end becomes unbearable. The future stretches before him as an endless, bleak expanse.

The novel urges everyone to recognize death as an essential component of life rather than an adversary to be conquered. It demands ethical engagement and the creation of individual meaning within a finite existence. Beauvoir's narrative offers a poignant reminder that mortality, rather than diminishing life, provides the essential framework within which authentic human freedom and meaning emerge, and a life unbounded by time is one devoid of meaning and agency. Beauvoir's work reminds us of existential philosophy's central idealogy that death is the "leveller" which ultimately imparts value and significance to human life, urging each person to live fully within the constraints of their finite existence.

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